A KISS WITH TEETH

MAX GLADSTONE

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illustration by

DAVID PALUMBO

TOR·COM

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Vlad no longer shows his wife his sharp teeth. He keeps them secret in his gums, waiting for the quickened skip of hunger, for the blood-rush he almost never feels these days.

The teeth he wears instead are blunt as shovels. He coffee-stains them carefully, soaks them every night in a mug with ‘World’s Best Dad’ written on the side. After eight years of staining, Vlad’s blunt teeth are the burnished yellow of the keys of an old unplayed piano. If not for the stain they would be whiter than porcelain. Much, much whiter than bone.

White, almost, as the sharp teeth he keeps concealed.

His wife Sarah has not tried to kill him since they married. She stores her holy water in a kitchen cabinet behind the spice rack, the silver bullets in a safe with her gun. She smiles when they make love, the smile of a woman sinking into a feather bed, a smile of jigsaw puzzles and blankets over warm laps by the fire. He smiles back, with his blunt teeth.

They have a son, a seven-year-old boy named Paul, straight and brown like his mother, a growing, springing sapling boy. Paul plays catch, Paul plays basketball, Paul dreams of growing up to be a football star, or a tennis star, or a baseball star, depending on the season. Vlad takes him to games. Vlad wears a baseball cap, and smells the pitcher's sweat and the ball's leather from their seat far up in the stands. He sees ball strike bat, sees ball and bat deform, and knows whether the ball will stutter out between third and second, or arc beautiful and deadly to outfield, fly true or veer across the foul line. He would tell his son, but Paul cannot hear fast enough. After each play, Paul explains the action, slow, patient and content. Paul smiles like his mother, and the smile sets Vlad on edge and spinning.

Sometimes Vlad remembers his youth, sprinting ahead of a cavalry charge to break like lightning on a stand of pikers. Blood, he remembers, oceans of it. Screams of the impaled. There is a sound men's breaking sterna make when you grab their ribs and pull them out and in, a bassy nightmare transposition of a wishbone's snap. Vlad knows the plural forms of 'sternum' and 'trachea,' and all declensions and participles of 'flense.'

* * *

"Talk to the teacher," his wife says after dinner. Paul watches a cricket game on satellite in the other room, mountainous Fijians squared off against an Indian team. Vlad once was a death cult in Calcutta—the entire cult, British colonial paranoia being an excellent cover for his appetites—and in the sixties he met a traveling volcano god in Fiji, who'd given up sacrifices when he found virgins could be had more easily by learning to play guitar. Neither experience left Vlad with much appreciation for cricket.

“On what topic should we converse,” he asks. He can never end sentences with prepositions. He learned English in a proper age.

“Paul. You should talk to the teacher about Paul.”

“Paul is not troubled.”

“He’s not troubled. But he’s having trouble.” She shows him the report card. She never rips envelopes open, uses instead a thin knife she keeps beside the ink blotter. Vlad has calculated that in eight years he will be the only person left in the world who uses an ink blotter.

The report card is printed on thick stock, and lists letters that come low in the limited alphabet of grades. No notes, no handwritten explanations. Paul is not doing well. From the next room, he shouts at the cricket match: “Go go go go!”

The teacher’s name is a smudge, a dot-matrix mistake.

* * *

At work Vlad pretends to be an accountant. He pretends to use spreadsheets and formulas to deliver pretend assurances to a client who pretends to follow the law. In furtive conversations at breaks he pretends to care about baseball. Pretending this is easy: Paul cares about baseball, recites statistical rosaries, tells Dad his hopes for the season every night when he’s tucked into bed. Vlad repeats these numbers in the break room, though he does not know if he says the right numbers in the right context.

From his cellular telephone, outside, he calls the number on the report card, and communicates in short sentences with someone he presumes is human.

“I would like to schedule a conference with my son’s teacher.” He tells them his son’s name.

“Yes, I will wait.”

“Six-thirty will be acceptable.”

“Thank you.”

* * *

Afternoons, on weekends, he and Paul play catch in a park one block up and two blocks over from their apartment. They live in a crowded city of towers and stone, a city that calls itself new and thinks itself old. The people in this city have long since learned to unsee themselves. Vlad and his son throw a baseball, catch it, and throw it back in an empty park that, if Vlad were not by now so good at this game of unseeing, he would describe as full: of couples wheeling strollers, of rats and dogs and running children, strolling cops and bearded boys on roller blades.

They throw and catch the ball in this empty not-empty field. Vlad throws slow, and Paul catches, slower, humoring his dad. Vlad sees himself through his son's eyes: sluggish and overly skinny, a man walks and runs and throws and catches as if first rehearsing the movements in his mind.

Vlad does rehearse. He has practiced thousands of times in the last decade. It took him a year to slow down so a human eye could see him shift from one posture to the next. Another year to learn to drop things, to let his grip slip, to suppress the instinct to right tipped teacups before they spilled, to grab knives before they left the hands that let them fall. Five years to train himself not to look at images mortal eyes could not detect. Sometimes at night, Paul's gaze darts up from his homework to strange corners of the room, and Vlad thinks he has failed, that the boy learned this nervous tic from him and will carry it through his life like a cross.

Vlad does not like the thought of crosses.

He throws the ball, and throws it back again: a white leather sphere oscillating through a haze of unseen ghosts.

* * *

The teacher waits, beautiful, blonde, and young. She smells like bruised mint and camellias. She rests against her classroom door, tired—she wakes

at four-fifteen every morning to catch a bus from Queens, so she can sit at her desk grading papers as the sun rises through steel canyons.

When he sees her, Vlad knows he should turn and leave. No good can come of this meeting. They are doomed, both of them.

Too late. He's walked the halls with steps heavy as a human's, squeaking the soles of his oxblood shoes against the tiles every few steps—a trick he learned a year back and thinks lends him an authentic air. The teacher looks up and sees him: black-haired and pale and too, too thin, wearing blue slacks and a white shirt with faint blue checks.

"You're Paul's father," she says, and smiles, damn her round white teeth. "Mister St. John."

"Bazarab," he corrects, paying close attention to his steps. Slow, as if walking through ankle-deep mud.

She turns to open the door, but stops with her hand on the knob. "I'm sorry?"

"Paul has his mother's last name. Bazarab is mine. It is strange in this country. Please call me Vlad." The nasal American 'a,' too, he has practiced.

"Nice to meet you, Vlad. I'm so glad you could take this time for me, and for Paul." She turns back to smile at him, and starts. Her pupils dilate a millimeter, and her heart rate spikes from a charming sixty-five beats per minute to seventy-four. Blood rises beneath the snow of her cheeks.

He stands a respectful three feet behind her. But cursing himself he realizes that seconds before he was halfway down the hall.

He smiles, covering his frustration, and ushers her ahead of him into the room. Her heart slows, her breath deepens: the mouse convincing itself that it mistook the tree's shadow for a hawk's. He could not have moved so fast, so silently. She must have heard his approach, and ignored it.

The room's sparsely furnished. No posters on the walls. Row upon row of desks, forty children at least could study here. Blackboard, two days

unwashed, a list of students' names followed by checks in multicolored chalk. This, he likes: many schools no longer use slate.

She sits on a desk, facing him. Her legs swing.

"You have a large room."

She laughs. "Not mine. We share the rooms." Her smile is sad. "Anyway. I'm glad to see you here. Why did you call?"

"My son. My wife asked me to talk with you about him. He has trouble in school, I think. I know he is a bright boy. His mother, my wife, she wonders why his grades are not so good. I think he is a child, he will improve with time, but I do not know. So I come to ask you."

"How can I help?"

Vlad shifts from foot to foot. Outside the night deepens. Streetlights buzz on. The room smells of dust and sweat and camellias and mint. The teacher's eyes are large and gray. She folds her lips into her mouth, bites them, and unfolds them again. Lines are growing from the corners of her mouth to the corners of her nose—the first signs of age. They surface at twenty-five or so. Vlad has studied them. He looks away from her. To see her is to know her pulse.

"What is he like in class, my son?"

"He's sweet. But he distracts easily. Sometimes he has trouble remembering a passage we've read a half hour after we've read it. In class he fidgets, and he often doesn't turn in his homework."

"I have seen him do the homework."

"Of course. I'm sorry. I'm not saying that he doesn't do it. He doesn't turn it in, though."

"Perhaps he is bored by your class." Her brow furrows, and he would kill men to clear it. "I do not mean that the class is easy. I know you have a difficult job. But perhaps he needs more attention."

"I wish I could give it to him. But any attention I give him comes from the other children in the class. We have forty. I don't have a lot of attention

left to go around."

"I see." He paces more. Good to let her see him move like a human being. Good to avert his eyes.

"Have you thought about testing him for ADHD? It's a common condition."

What kind of testing? And what would the testing of his son reveal? "Could I help somehow? Review his work with him?"

She stands. "That's a great idea." The alto weight has left her voice, excitement returning after a day of weeks. "If you have time, I mean. I know it would help. He looks up to you."

Vlad laughs. Does his son admire the man, or the illusion? Or the monster, whom he has never seen? "I do not think so. But I will help if I can."

He turns from the window, and she walks toward him, holding a bright red folder. "These are his assignments for the week. If it helps, come back and I'll give you the next bunch."

She smiles.

Vlad, cold, afraid, smiles back.

* * *

"Great," his wife says when he tells her. She does not ask about the teacher, only the outcome. "Great. Thank you." She folds him in her arms, and he feels her strength. In the bathroom mirror they remind him of chess pieces, alabaster and mahogany. "I hate that building. The classrooms scare me. So many bad memories."

"Elementary school has no hold on me."

"Of course not." A quick soft peck on the cheek, and she fades from him, into their small hot bedroom. "This will help Paul, I know."

* * *

Vlad does not know. Every school night he sits with Paul in their cramped living room, bent over the coffee table, television off. Vlad drags a pencil across the paper, so slowly he feels glaciers might scour down the Hudson and carve a canyon from Manhattan by the time he finishes a single math problem. After a long division painstaking as a Tibetan monk's sand mandala he finds Paul asleep on the table beside him, cheek pooled on wood, tongue twitching pink between his lips. With a touch he wakes the boy, and once Paul stretches out and closes his eyes and shakes the sleep away (his mother's habit), they walk through the problem together, step by step. Then Paul does the next, and Vlad practices meditation, remembering cities rise and fall.

"Do you understand?" he asks.

"Dad, I get it."

Paul does not get it. The next week he brings each day's quizzes home, papers dripping blood.

"Perseverance is important," Vlad says. "In this world you must make something of yourself. It is not enough to be what you are."

"It all takes so long." The way Paul looks at Vlad when they talk makes Vlad wonder whether he has made some subtle mistake.

* * *

The following week Vlad returns to the school. Entering through swinging doors, he measures each step slow and steady. The shoes, he remembers to squeak. The eyes, he remembers to move. The lungs, he remembers to fill and empty. So many subtle ways to be human, and so many subtle ways to be wrong.

The halls are vacant, and still smell of dust and rubber and chemical soap. He could identify the chemical, if he put his mind to it.

He cannot put his mind to anything.

The teacher’s room nears. Slow, slow. He smells her, faint trace of camellias and mint. He will not betray himself again.

The door to her classroom stands ajar. Through the space, he sees only empty desks.

A man sits at her desk, bent over papers like a tuberculotic over his handkerchief. He wears a blue shirt with chalk dust on the right cuff. His nails are ragged, and a pale scalp peeks through his thin hair.

“Where is the teacher?”

The man recoils as if he’s touched a live wire. His chair falls and he knocks over a cup of pens and chalk and paperclips. Some spill onto the ground. Vlad does not count them. The man swears. His heart rate jumps to ninety beats a minute. If someone would scare him this way every hour for several months he would begin to lose the paunch developing around his waist. “Damn. Oh my god. Who the hell.”

“I am Mister Bazarab,” he says. “What has happened to the teacher?”

“I didn’t hear,” says the man. “I am the teacher. A teacher.” Kneeling, he scrabbles over the tiles to gather scattered pens.

“The teacher who I was to meet here. The teacher of my son. A young woman. Blonde hair. About this tall.” He does not mention her smell. Most people do not find such descriptions useful.

“Oh,” says the man. “Mister Bazarab.” He does not pronounce the name correctly. “I’m sorry. Angela had to leave early today. Family thing. She left this for you.” He dumps the gathered detritus back into the cup, and searches among piles of paperwork for a red folder like the one the teacher gave Vlad the week before. He offers Vlad the folder, and when Vlad takes it from him the man draws his hand back fast as if burned.

“Is she well? She is not sick I hope.”

“She’s fine. Her father went to the hospital. I think.”

“I am glad,” Vlad says, and when he sees the other’s confusion he adds, “that she is well. Thank her for this, please.”

Vlad does not open the folder until he is outside the school. The teacher has a generous, looped cursive hand. She thanks Vlad for working with his son. She apologizes for missing their meeting. She suggests he return next week. She promises to be here for him then.

Vlad does not examine the rest of the folder's contents until he reaches home. He reads the note three times on his walk. He tries not to smell the camellias, or the chalk, or the slight salt edge of fear. He smells them anyway.

* * *

His wife returns late from the library. While he works with Paul, she does pull-ups on the bar they sling over the bedroom doorjamb. She breathes heavily through her mouth as she rises and falls. Behind her shadows fill their unlit bedroom.

Paul works long division. How many times does seven go into forty-three, and how much is left over? How far can you carry out the decimal? Paul's pencil breaks, and he sharpens it in the translucent bright red plastic toy his mother bought him, with pleasant curves to hide the tiny blade inside.

Vlad wants to teach Paul to sharpen his pencils with a knife, but sharpening pencils with a knife is not common these days, and anyway they'd have to collect the shaved bits of wood and graphite afterward. The old ways were harder to clean up.

"Tell me about your teacher," Vlad says.

"She's nice," Paul replies. "Three goes into eight two times, and two's left over."

"Nice," Vlad echoes.

Once his wife's exercises are done, they send Paul to bed. "I miss cricket," he says as they tuck him in. "I miss tennis and football and baseball."

“This is only for now,” says Vlad’s wife. “Once your work gets better, you can watch again. And play.”

“Okay.” The boy is not okay, but he knows what he is supposed to say.

In the kitchen, the kettle screams. They leave Paul in his dark room. Vlad’s wife pours tea, disappears into their bedroom, and emerges soon after wearing flannel pajamas and her fluffy robe, hair down. She looks tired. She looks happy. Vlad cannot tell which she looks more. She sits cross-legged on the couch, tea steaming on the table beside her, and opens a book in her lap.

“You’re doing it again,” she says ten minutes later.

“What?”

“Not moving.”

An old habit of his when idle: find a dark corner, stand statue-still, and observe. He smiles. “I am tired. I start to forget.”

“Or remember,” she says.

“I always remember.” He sits in the love seat, at right angles to her.

“It’s wonderful what you’re doing with Paul.”

“I want to help.”

“You do.”

He shifts from the love seat to the couch, and does not bother to move slow. The wind of his passage puffs in her eyes. She blinks, and nestles beside him.

“This is okay for you? I worry sometimes.” Her hand’s on his thigh. It rests there, strong, solid. “You’ve been quiet. I hope you’re telling me what you need.”

Need. He does not use that word much, even to himself. He needed this, ten years ago. Ten years ago she chased him, this beauty with the methodical mind, ferretted his secrets out of ancient archives and hunted him around the world. Ten years ago, he lured her to the old castle in the mountains, one last challenge. Ten years ago she shone in starlight filtered

through cracks in the castle's roof. He could have killed her and hid again, as he had before. Remained a leaf blown from age to age and land to land on a wind of blood.

She'd seemed so real in the moonlight.

So he descended and spoke with her, and they found they knew one another better than anyone else. And ten years passed.

What does he need?

He leans toward her. His sharp teeth press on the inside of his gums, against the false yellowed set. He smells her blood. He smells camellias. His teeth recede. He kisses her on the forehead.

"I love you," they both say. Later he tries to remember which of them said it first.

* * *

He sees the teacher every week after that. Angela, on Thursdays. With the blonde hair and the strong heart. She tells him how Paul's work is coming. She coaches him on how to coach his son, suggests games to play, discusses concepts the class will cover in the next week. Vlad wonders not for the first time why he doesn't teach his son himself. But they talked, he and his wife, back when they learned she was pregnant. They are not a normal couple, and whatever else Paul must learn, he must first learn how to seem normal.

He has learned how to be so normal he cannot do basic math. So Vlad stands in the schoolroom ramrod straight, and nods when he understands Angela and asks questions when he does not. He keeps his distance.

Vlad learns things about her, from her. He learns that she lives alone. He learns that her father in the hospital is the only parent to whom she is close, her mother having left them both in Angela's childhood, run off with a college friend leaving behind a half-drunk vodka bottle and a sorry note. He

learns that she has tight-wound nerves like a small bird’s, that she looks up at every sound of footsteps in the hall. That she does not sleep enough.

He does not need to learn her scent. That, he knows already.

* * *

One night he follows her home.

This is a mistake.

She leaves the building well after sunset and walks to the bus; she rides one bus straight home. So he takes to the roofs, and chases the bus.

A game, he tells himself. Humans hunt these days, in the woods, in the back country, and they do not eat the meat they kill. Fisherman catch fish to throw them back. And this night run is no more dangerous to him than fishing to an angler. He leaves his oxfords on the schoolhouse rooftop and runs barefoot over buildings and along bridge wires, swift and soft. Even if someone beneath looked up, what is he? Wisp of cloud, shiver of a remembered nightmare, bird spreading wings for flight. A shadow among shadows.

A game, he tells himself, and lies. He only learns he’s lying later, though, after she emerges from the bus and he tracks her three blocks to her studio apartment and she drops her keys on the stoop and kneels quick and tense as a spooked rabbit to retrieve them, after she enters her apartment and he delays, debates, and finally retreats across the river to the schoolhouse where he dons his oxfords and inspects himself in a deli window and pats his hair into place and brushes dust off his slacks and jacket—only learns it when his wife asks him why there’s dust on his collar and he shakes his head and says something about a construction site. His round teeth he returns to their cup of coffee, and he lies naked on their bed, curled around her like a vine. His wife smells of sweat and woman and dark woods, and smelling her reminds him of another smell. Teeth peek through

his gums, and his wife twists pleased and tired beside him, and he lies there lying, and relives the last time he killed.

* * *

The first step taken, the second follows, and the third faster. As when he taught Paul to ride a bicycle: easier to keep balance when moving.

He's no longer stiff in their weekly meetings. He jokes about the old country and lets his accent show. Her laughter relieves the lines on her face.

"You and your wife both work," she says. "I know tutoring Paul takes time. Could his grandparents help at all?"

"His mother's family is far away," Vlad says. "My parents are both dead."

"I'm sorry."

His father died in a Turkish assault when he was fourteen; his mother died of one of the many small illnesses people died from back then. "It was sudden, and hard," he says, and they don't speak more of that. He recognizes the brief flash of sympathy in her eyes.

He follows her home again that night, hoping to see something that will turn him aside. She may visit friends, or call on an old paramour, or her father in the hospital. She may have a boyfriend or girlfriend. But she changes little. She stops at the drug store to buy toothpaste, bottled water, and sanitary napkins. She fumbles the keys at her door but does not drop them this time.

He leaves.

Paul, that night, is too tired to study. Vlad promises to help him more tomorrow. Paul frowns at the promise. Frowns don't yet sit well on his face. He's too young. Vlad tells him so, and lifts him upside down, and he shrieks laughter as Vlad carries him back to the bedroom.

Work is a dream. He is losing the knack of normalcy. Numbers dance to his command. He walks among cubicles clothed in purpose, and where once

the white-collared workers forgot him as he passed, now they fall silent and stare in his wake. Management offers him a promotion for no reason, which he turns down. Silences between Vlad and Angela grow tense. He apologizes, and she says there is no need for an apology.

He and his wife make love twice that week. Ravenous, she pins him to the bed, and feasts.

Paul seems cautious in the mornings, silent between mouthfuls of cereal. At evening catch, Vlad almost forgets, almost hurls the ball up and out, over the park, over the city, into the ocean.

He can't go on like this. Woken, power suffuses him. He slips into old paths of being, into ways he trained himself to forget. One evening on his home commute he catches crows flocking above him on brownstone rooftops. Black beady eyes wait for his command.

This is no way to be a father. No way to be a man.

But Vlad was a monster before he was a man.

Again and again he follows her, as the heat of early autumn cools. The year will die. Show me some danger, he prays. Show me some reason I cannot close my fingers and seize you. But she is alone in the world, and sad.

Paul's grades slip. Vlad apologizes to Angela. He has been distracted.

"It's okay," she says. "It happens. Don't blame yourself."

He does not blame her. But this must end.

* * *

He makes his wife breakfast on the last morning. Bacon. Eggs, scrambled hard, with cheese. Orange juice, squeezed fresh. The squeezing takes time, but not so much for Vlad. He wakes early to cook, and moves at his own pace—fast. Fat pops and slithers in the pan. Eggs bubble. He ticks off seconds while he waits for the bacon to fry, for the eggs to congeal after. By the time his wife steps out of the shower, breakfast's ready and the kitchen

is clean. He makes Paul's lunch, because it's his turn. He cannot make amends.

His wife sucks the strip of bacon before she bites. "Delicious." She hums happily, hugs him around the waist. "So good. Isn't your dad a good cook?"

Paul laughs. Vlad thinks it is a knowing laugh, because he is afraid.

"It's not Mother's Day," his wife says. "That's in May."

"I love you," Vlad answers. Paul makes a face like a punchinello mask.

Crows follow him to work, hopping sideways along the roofs. When he reaches midtown they perch on streetlamps and traffic lights. Red, yellow, and green reflect in their eyes in turn. The *Times* reports power outages in suburbs last night from unexpected vicious wind. Asylums and hospitals brim with madmen, raving, eating bugs. Vlad is over-empty, a great mounting void, and the world rushes to fill him.

He breaks a keyboard that day from typing too hard. Drives his pinkie finger through the enter key into his desk, embedding a sliver of plastic in his skin. He pulls the plastic out and the wound heals. I.T. replaces the keyboard.

Vlad finishes his work by three and sits in his cubicle till sunset. Thunderclouds cluster overhead by the time he leaves the building. Heat lightning flickers on his walk uptown. Fear shines at each flash from the eyes of the peasants he passes. Peasants: another word he has not thought or used in years.

All this will be over soon, he tells himself. And back to normal.

Whatever normal is.

He meets her in the classroom, though they do not talk long. The time for talking's past. She is all he remembered: sunlight and marble, camellia and mint. The ideal prey. Blood throbs through small veins in her fingers. He feels it when they shake hands. He smells its waves, rising and falling.

“I must thank you,” he says, once she’s gone over Paul’s assignments for the next week. “For your dedication. You have given Paul so much. I appreciate your work.”

“It’s nothing.” She may think he cannot hear her exhaustion, or else she trusts him and does not care. “I’m glad to help. If every father cared as much as you do, we’d be in a better world.”

“I am fortunate,” he says, “to be in a position to care.”

He follows her from the school, as before. After sunset the crows stop hiding. In masses they descend on the city and croak prophecy in its alleys. Currents of crows rush down Broadway, so thick pedestrians mistake them for a cloud, their wing-beats for the rumble of traffic or a train. Bats emerge from their lairs, and rats writhe on subway steps singing rat songs. Grandmothers remember their grandmothers’ whispered stories, and call children to urge them to stay inside.

Better this way, Vlad thinks as he follows Angela across the bridge, down the dirty deserted street from her stop to her apartment. She does not notice him. She notices nothing. The rats, the crows, the bats, all keep away from her. They know Vlad’s purpose tonight, and will not interfere.

She’s young, her life still a web of dream, her love just touched by sadness. This world holds only pain for her. Better, surely, to leave before that pain bloomed, before tenderness roughed into a callous.

His gums itch. He slides the false teeth from his mouth, places them in a Ziploc bag, closes the seal, and slips the bag into his jacket pocket. Crouched atop the roof of the building across from Angela’s, he sees her shuffle down the street. The weight of her shoulder bag makes her limp.

His teeth, his real teeth, emerge, myriad and sharp. He tastes their tips and edges with his tongue.

She opens the door, climbs the steps. He follows her heartbeat up four floors, five, to the small studio.

He leaps across the street, lands soft as shadow on Angela's roof beside the skylight. Below, a door opens and light wakes. Though she's drawn curtains across the glass, there are gaps, and he sees her through them. She sags back against the door to close it, lets her bag clatter to the ground and leans into the scuffed dark wood, eyes closed.

Her apartment looks a mess because it's small: a stack of milk crates turned to bookshelves, overflowing with paperbacks and used textbooks. A small lacquered pine board dresser in stages of advanced decay, its side crisscrossed with bumper stickers bearing logos of bands Vlad does not recognize. A couch that slides out to form a bed, separated from the kitchenette by a narrow coffee table. Sheets piled in a hamper beside the couch-bed, dirty clothes in another hamper, dishes in the sink.

She opens her eyes, and steps out of the circle formed by the shoulder strap of her fallen bag. Two steps to the fridge, from which she draws a beer. She opens the cap with a fob on her keychain, tosses the cap in the recycling, and takes a long drink. Three steps from fridge around the table to the couch, where she sits, takes another drink, then swears, "Mother*fuck*er," first two syllables drawn out and low, the third a high clear peal like those little bells priests used to ring in the litany. She lurches back to her feet, retrieves her bag, sits again on couch and pulls from the bag a thick sheaf of papers and a red pen and proceeds to grade.

Vlad waits. Not now, certainly. Not as she wades through work. You take your prey in joy: insert yourself into perfection, sharp as a needle's tip. When she entered the room, he might have done it then. But the moment's passed.

She grades, finishes her beer, gets another. After a while she returns the papers to their folder, and the folder to her bag. From the milk crate bookshelves she retrieves a bulky laptop, plugs it in, and turns on a television show about young people living in the city, who all have bigger

apartments than hers. Once in a while, she laughs, and after she laughs, she drinks.

He watches her watching. He can only permit himself this once, so it must be perfect. He tries to see the moment in his mind. Does she lie back in her bed, smiling? Does she spy him through the curtains, and climb on a chair to open the skylight and let him in? Does she scream and run? Does she call his name? Do they embrace? Does he seize her about the neck and drag her toward him while she claws ineffectually at his eyes and cheeks until her strength gives out?

She closes the laptop, dumps the dregs of her beer in the sink, tosses the empty into the recycling, walks into the bathroom, closes the door. The toilet flushes, the water runs, and he hears her floss, and brush her teeth, gargle and spit into the sink.

Do it. The perfect moment won't come. There's no such thing.

The doorknob turns.

What is he waiting for? He wants her to see him, know him, understand him, fear him, love him at the last. He wants her to chase him around the world, wants a moonlit showdown in a dark castle.

He wants to be her monster. To transform her life in its ending.

The door opens. She emerges, wearing threadbare blue pajamas. Four steps back to the couch, which she slides out into a bed. She spreads sheets over the bed, a comforter on top of them, and wriggles under the comforter. Hair halos her head on the dark pillow.

Now.

She can reach the light switch from her bed. The room goes dark save for the blinking lights of coffee maker and charging cell phone and laptop. He can still see her staring at the ceiling. She sighs.

He stands and turns to leave.

Moonlight glints off glass ten blocks away.

* * *

His wife has almost broken down the rifle by the time he reaches her—nine seconds. She's kept in practice. The sniper scope is stowed already; as he arrives, she's unscrewing the barrel. She must have heard him coming, but she waits for him to speak first.

She hasn't changed from the library. Khaki pants, a cardigan, comfortable shoes. Her hair up, covered by a dark cap. She wears no jewels but for his ring and her watch.

"I'm sorry," he says, first.

"I'll say."

"How did you know?"

"Dust on your collar. Late nights."

"I mean, how did you know it would be now?"

"I got dive-bombed by crows on the sidewalk this morning. One of the work-study kids came in high, babbling about the prince of darkness. You're not as subtle as you used to be."

"Well. I'm out of practice."

She looks up at him. He realizes he's smiling, and with his own teeth. He stops.

"Don't."

"I'm sorry."

"You said that already." Finished with the rifle, she returns it to the case, and closes the zipper, and stands. She's shorter than he is, broader through the shoulders. "What made you stop?"

"She wasn't you."

"Cheek."

"No."

"So what do we do now?"

"I don't know. I thought I was strong enough to be normal. But these are me." He bares his teeth at her. "Not these." From his pocket he draws the false teeth, and holds them out, wrapped in plastic, in his palm. Closes his

fingers. Plastic cracks, crumbles. He presses it to powder, and drops bag and powder both. “Might as well kill me now.”

“I won’t.”

“I’m a monster.”

“You’re just more literal than most.” She looks away from him, raises her knuckle to her lip. Looks back.

“You deserve a good man. A normal man.”

“I went looking for you.” She doesn’t shout, but something in her voice makes him retreat a step, makes his heart thrum and almost beat.

“I miss.” Those two words sound naked. He struggles to finish the sentence. “I miss when we could be dangerous to one another.”

“You think you’re the only one who does? You think the PTA meetings and the ask your mothers and the how’s your families at work, you think that stuff doesn’t get to me? Think I don’t wonder how I became this person?”

“It’s not that simple. If I lose control, people die. Look at tonight.”

“You stopped. And if you screw up.” She nudges the rifle case with her toe. “There’s always that.”

“Paul needs a normal family. We agreed.”

“He needs a father more. One who’s not too scared of himself to be there.”

He stops himself from shouting something he will regret. Closes his lips, and his eyes, and thinks for a long while, as the wind blows over their rooftop. His eyes hurt. “He needs a mother, too,” he says.

“Yes. He does.”

“I screwed up tonight.”

“You did. But I think we can work on this. Together. How about you?”

“Sarah,” he says.

She looks into his eyes. They embrace, once, and part. She kneels to lift the rifle case.

“Here,” he says. “Let me get that for you.”

* * *

The next week, Friday, he plays catch with Paul in the park. They’re the only ones there save the ghosts: it’s cold, but Paul’s young, and while Vlad can feel the cold it doesn’t bother him. Dead trees overhead, skeletal fingers raking sky. Leaves spin in little whirlwinds. The sky’s blue and empty, sun already sunk behind the buildings.

Vlad unbuttons his coat, lets it fall. Strips off his sweater, balls it on top of the coat. Stands in his shirtsleeves, cradles the football with his long fingers. Tightens his grip. Does not burst the ball, only feels the air within resist his fingers’ pressure.

Paul steps back, holds up his hands.

Vlad shakes his head. “Go deeper.”

He runs, crumbling dry leaves and breaking hidden sticks.

“Deeper,” Vlad calls, and waves him on.

“Here?” Vlad’s never thrown the ball this far.

“More.”

Paul stands near the edge of the park. “That’s all there is!”

“Okay,” Vlad says. “Okay. Are you ready?”

“Yes!”

His throws are well-rehearsed. Wind up slowly, and toss soft. He beat them into his bones.

He forgets all that.

Black currents weave through the wind. A crow calls from treetops. He stands, a statue of ice.

He throws the ball as hard as he can.

A loud crack echoes through the park. Ghosts scatter, dive for cover. The ball breaks the air, and its passage leaves a vacuum trail. Windows

rattle and car alarms whoop. Vlad wasn't aiming for his son. He didn't want to hurt him. He just wanted to throw.

Vlad's eyes are faster even than his hands, and sharp. So he sees Paul blink, in surprise more than fear. He sees Paul understand. He sees Paul smile.

And he sees Paul blur sideways and catch the ball.

They stare at one another across the park. The ball hisses in Paul's hands, deflates: it broke in the catching. Wind rolls leaves between them.

Later, neither can remember who laughed first.

* * *

They talk for hours after that. Chase one another around the park, so fast they seem only colors on the wind. High-pitched child's screams of joy, and Vlad's own voice, deep, guttural. Long after the sky turns black and the stars don't come out, they return home, clothes grass-stained, hair tangled with sticks and leaves. Paul does his homework, fast, and they watch cricket until after bedtime.

Sarah waits in the living room when he leaves Paul sleeping. She grabs his arms and squeezes, hard enough to bruise, and pulls him into her kiss.

He kisses her back with his teeth.

Science fiction. Fantasy. The universe.
And related subjects.

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